

Report of Councillor Elissa Swinglehurst Llangarron Ward

January 2019

The start of January was pretty quiet at the council and was a chance for me to catch up on things in my non council life. I didn't seem to be any less busy – it's a mystery how I manage to find the time to do the council work as well as what I might call 'my life'.

I was glad to have some time to quietly reflect and consider the two court cases that I referred to in my last posting. On 18th January there was an Extraordinary Full Council meeting called by members who felt that we needed a more public discussion of these complex issues. I had to field a number of questions from members and the public – indeed, rather more than the agenda might have suggested. To my mind there was an opportunity here for members to look at the court judgements and at the proposed and ongoing improvements to satisfy themselves that we are taking the appropriate and proportionate actions in response; there was an opportunity to hear constructive input from opposition members as to what actions they feel we are not taking and we should take or what actions we are taking that we ought not to. Sadly, no such insight was forthcoming. This might be partially due to the fact that a full council meeting is not the right forum for such detailed discussion – it is, to be honest, a bit of a blunt instrument and a bit of theatre – the scrutiny committee is actually the best public forum for such work but – according to some members – it just isn't public enough (??) which does beg the question as to why – exactly – it was felt necessary to have a full council meeting in the first place. I would suggest that it has far more to do with the upcoming local elections than with the placing of children into care.

Having said that, I am grateful for the generosity of opposition members in congratulating me after the meeting and I look forward to continuing to work in a non partisan way to bring the required improvements to children's services in Herefordshire.

Brief Encounter

I attended the Symposium on Social Care that was organised by the High Sherriff Nat Hone and was introduced to the judge who had made such excoriating comments in his judgement on the two cases. His Honour Mr Justice Keehan struck me as someone prowling the streets looking for a fight – he was in expectation of some 'push back' from the local authority that he has so roundly criticised but, of course, he was met with nothing but good humour and lots of sandwiches. No one is in any sort of position to cross swords with Mr Justice Keehan and thus his combative instinct is perhaps a little frustrated.

The Symposium featured the great and the good who shared their considerable insight and experience with the assembled company. I was particularly struck by a quote from Earnest Rutherford that was referenced by Richard Humphries of the Kings Fund –

"We have no money, so we will have to think"

Which applies to so many things I will have to try to remember it.

There were some interesting statistics that also came out and which I would like to share with you

Since 2010, nationally, there has been a 40% reduction in the funding for Children's Services but during the same time there has been an increase in the use of those services (5% increase in Children in Need, 10% increase Children in Care, 29% Child Protection Plans). One in Ten children and young people have a mental health condition. 600 youth centres have closed. 1200

childrenscentres have closed. For every £1 spent on prevention it is estimated that £ 4 is saved on reactive work.

35% of social workers leave their post within 3 years.

Councils average spend nationally is

43% on Adult Social Care

22% Childrens Social care

2.2% roads

NHS spending has doubled since 1994 but there has not been the same increase of spend on adult social care.

There are immense pressures on social workers, the courts and all the people who heroically deal with such difficulties on a day to day basis. Sir Andrew Macfarlane described social care as a machine that will grind on but individuals will fall under the wheels.

It is crucially important that, as a society, we change the narrative about social workers. They are not interfering busybodies in bobble hats – they are bloody heroic. They go into situations that most of us would run away from, they take children away from harm, they support families in crisis, they save lives and the only time we ever pay them any attention at all is when there has been some bad news. The column inches and social media storm over these two court cases is not surprising but I would only ask that the 94 successful permanent placements made during the same period should also be acknowledged. One of the biggest problems we have in Herefordshire is to recruit and retain staff – especially social workers – so, if you are wondering what to do for a career, if you want to stay in county and work to improve the lives of others then be a social worker. We need you.

And by the way, the left over sandwiches were donated to the night shelter.

‘Talk Communities’ – the second Parish Council Summit

I was pleased to be in the Shire Hall with delegates from Llangarron Parish Council, Bridstow Parish Council, Marstow Parish Council and Welsh Newton and Llanrothal Parish Council. The leader of the Council, Jonathan Lester, took a number of ad hoc questions from the floor about specific problems within parishes which he was quickly able to refer to the officers present. I must say that the parish summits are an unrivalled opportunity to talk to the officers at a very senior level but they are also a conversation about how we all, as elected representatives, should work together to deliver services across our lovely, rural county. This summit focussed on the delivery of social care and Directors Stephen Vickers (adults) and Chris Baird (childrens) outlined the challenges. The parish council delegates then ‘brainstormed’ the topic and came up with a number of creative and constructive suggestions which I know are being taken forward. There was a fine array of sandwiches provided by young people who are NEET (not in employment, education or training) and the left overs went to the night shelter.

Across all these events there was a theme that was clear to see – prevention is better than cure, a small intervention in a timely way, a stitch in time – and there is a role for local communities in identifying vulnerable individuals and perhaps just doing something simple like knocking on the door and saying hello – being a good neighbour. There is a ‘good neighbour scheme’ – which is running very successfully at Sellack (well done Sellack Parish Council and Carole Adjinka) and any number of other individual efforts. What we hope to do is co-ordinate more effectively, support where needed

and improve the lives of residents as a result. There is likely to be some funding coming forward so...watch this space.

And finally – planning

I had made two referrals to the planning committee that both came up on the same day in January.

The process for a redirection to the planning committee decision is outlined in the council constitution (part 4 section 8)

<http://councillors.herefordshire.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=332&MId=6384&Ver=4&Info=1->

in a nutshell I can put in the request and it is considered against the criteria for redirection by a panel. Not every request for a redirect is accepted by the panel.

The first application that was before the committee was for 5 houses opposite the Royal Arms Pub in Llangrove. There was representation from the parish council, an objector and I also spoke about the application. The officer's recommendation was to approve the application and, in the end, that is what the committee did. The applicant had worked hard with the planning officer to meet local concerns and the scheme was felt to be sensitive to the area with significant benefits to the village (open space, tree and hedge planting, drainage scheme). The principle concern was the loss of hedgerow along the road which, it was felt, would damage the rural setting of the pub and 'urbanise' the area. The committee took that on board but felt, on balance, that it did not outweigh the presumption in favour of sustainable development and the benefits of the scheme.

The second application was for 9 houses in Glewstone. There was an objection from the landscape officer due to the impact on the AONB which, on balance, the planning officer did not feel merited refusal given the net environmental benefit that the scheme offered and the discrete nature of the site. I spoke against the application and in support of local objectors to the scheme. On this occasion the planning committee felt that the harm identified to the AONB significantly and demonstrably outweighed the benefit of the scheme. Questions were also raised as to the sustainability of the village as it has no services or alternatives to travel by car.

Both applications had been the subject of above average public concern and it was on that basis that they were allowed at committee.

Coming soon...

Next big item is the budget setting (again) – unusually this year there is an 'alternative budget' being put forward by It's Our County so the full council meeting is likely to provide a livelier debate than average for a budget meeting.

As always, if you have any concerns that you would like to raise with me please get in touch

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